Resources

There's lots of stuff I didn't cover in here, like eating disorder information, and the many problems with the health care institution just to name a couple. So here's a bunch of places to look for information about what I've written and other related topics.

-Big Fat Facts http://www.bigfatfacts.com/ facts about fat and health and the diet industry, a lot of what I have written here, but in a shorter form.

-Junkfood Science: Critical examinations of studies and news on food, weight, health, and healthcare that mainstream media miss. Debunks popular myths, explains science and exposes fraud that affects your health. Plus some fun food for thought. For readers not afraid to question and think critically to get to the truth. http:// junkfoodscience.blogspot.com/

-The F Word; Food. Fat. Feminism. http://the-f-word.org/blog/ a site written by a women recovering from an eating disorder, it has news stories, and good critiques of just what it says, food fat and feminism.

-Body Impolitic http://laurietobyedison.com/discuss/ an interesting and well-written blog about body image, sexuality etc.

-Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West by Peter N. Stearns. NYU Press, 2002 ISBN 081479824I a book with a detailed historical look at fat and all its related issues

-The Terror Within: Obesity in Post 9/11 US Life by Charlotte Billekoff a super interesting essay about the ways the "war against obesity" strengthens the "war on terror."

-Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture, and the politics of fat. By Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis interesting paper, just what it sounds like.

-Revolting Bodies: the struggle to redefine fat identity by Kathleen Lebesco Published by Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2004 ISBN 155849429I Good book, puts fat oppression in a political context, linked to other oppressions.

Please send copious amounts questions, responses, and other feedback to fatpolitics@gmail.com

The Politics of Fat
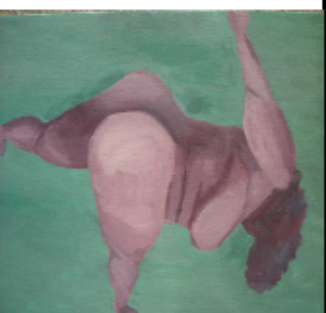
by Flo

Introduction

I spent years hating my own body, counting every calorie I consumed. I have written records of everything I put into my mouth covering a 6 year time span. I tried weird diet plans, vastly restricted my food consumption, and forced myself to spend many hours each week exercising. At one point I was only eating about 500 calories per day (general recommendations are for 2000 per day). While I did lose weight, I didn't lose much; only about 10lbs. That was enough, however, to gain me compliments from people over how I looked and, ironically, praise from my doctor for lowering my weight. But eventually, because I was eating almost nothing, my body went into starvation mode and began storing every calorie I fed it. Only then, when I started gaining weight again, did I realize that the way I was living wasn't healthy.

Only in the past couple years have I begun to be more ok with my body. A lot of that process has involved finding out about the systems that are set up to make me hate my body in order to sell me stuff, and the myths and stereotypes that surround fatness in our society. I have also been helped by communities and lovers who appreciate my body as it is. I now make a conscious effort to thank my body for all the things it allows me to do: to walk and bike, to stretch and dance, to hug and kiss. My body is what allows me to do everything I do; I'm stuck with it for life, so I should love it as best I can.

other that our hurt is real, and is not our own fault. I don't have a good solution to these problems; my optimistic anarchist side says just overthrow the media, and the patriarchy, and colonialism! But my pragmatic side says those things won't happen anytime soon. They won't happen because we've gotten so used to being told it's our own fault, that we're imaging it and we just have to work harder, be better. So what I can recommend right now is more of those soul baring discussions, in the hope that if all of us realize what's happening isn't in our heads, that it's real and it's happening to everyone else around us too. The things you experience are not imaginary, they are real, and valid, talking to others you may be surprised how much less alone you are than you think.

Lies and Misconceptions

So you know all this paranoia and media attention about the "obesity epidemic"? Most of that is fear tactics, telling you to be constantly vigilant in your self-monitoring, reducing food to numbers of calories and health to numbers of pounds. All of this calculating and monitoring takes up time and energy that could be better focused on dealing with real problems. It's a distraction.

Medically, obesity is determined by a measure called the Body Mass Index, or BMI, a measure of height and weight: nothing else. The BMI doesn't take into account that muscle weighs more than fat, or that female-bodied people often have more body fat than male-bodied people, or that as we get older we generally gain weight, or for variation in body type etc. In the early 1990s the cutoffs on the BMI scale for normal, overweight, obese etc. were shifted dramatically, causing thousands of people to be considered obese over night, without actually changing their

by community support for people dealing withbody image issues, eating disorders, or those facing weight based discrimination.

The issue of fat discrimination, and the "beauty" and diet industries, are just symptoms of a larger system; one that needs us to feel we are not good enough, and must buy stuff to get closer to the unattainable ideal. A system that values conformity, blaming the victim, and people who are so distracted trying to fix themselves that they fail to recognize the real cause of their problems. A system that needs a class of people without power to work long hours, day after day.

Ideas and Definitions

The problem with many of the issues we try to combat is that they're everywhere. "Disordered eating" is normal in our society. Having an eating disorder of some kind is not something that a few people have; eating disorders are something that pretty much every girl I know, myself included, and many of the guys too have gone through. I just read a moving essay about sexual assault talking about the countless small ways many women are sexually assaulted everyday. People are brought up with a definition of what rape looks like, and so the everyday experiences of sexual assault are swept under the rug. Again, this is not a rare issue, the vast majority of women I have talked to have experienced some sort of sexual assault, or been coerced into doing things they didn't

Health & Phobia

So why are people in our society so fat phobic? If you believe the mainstream media (or your insurance company) it's because "being fat is a health risk." Now clearly what you eat and how much you exercise are related to how healthy you are; no one is claiming that a diet of big macs & soda, and a life of sitting at a desk, isn't bad for your body. What I (and many other people who are criticizing the fear tactics used against us) claim is that how much you weigh is not a measure of health.

Think about it for a second, who's healthier? The person who lives off of fast food, and works an office job that forces them to not move all day? Or the person who is vegan, tries to eat locally grown fruits & vegetables, walks or bikes almost everywhere she goes, and spends hours each week dancing? Would your answer change if you were told that the first person falls into the "normal" BMI category and the second person is considered "obese" according to her BMI? And no claiming it's not possible for that to be true, that second person, that one's me.

Clearly there are many reasons fat people are so feared and hated in our culture, and one of the main ones is the conflation of ones physical body with ones actions and morals. We are told that fat people are lazy, that they aren't productive, that all they do is sit on the couch watching TV, that they have no self control. None of these factors are actually related to weight. There are plenty of thin people for whom these characteristics are true, and plenty of fat people who fit none of these descriptions.

and therefore seen as lazy. In this way, the same discrimination faced by the poor and people of color can now be justified by assumptions made about weight. The cures to this "disease" are consumption (buy diet books, gym memberships, wonder pills etc.) and looking to science for a miracle cure, and cures which can be as extreme as life threatening surgery.
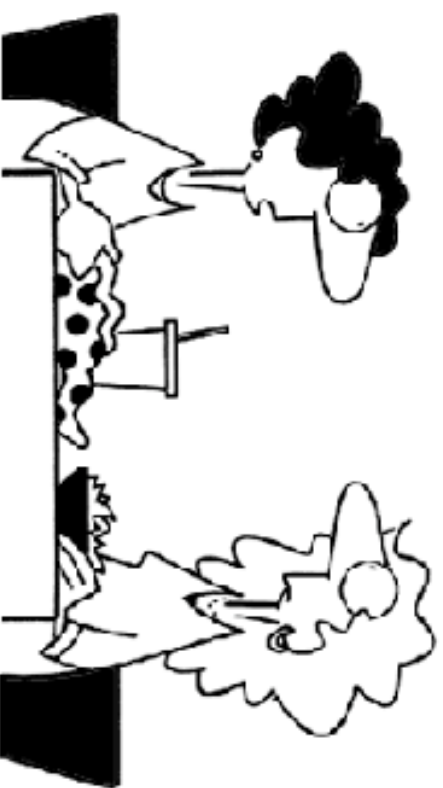
"I have my own version of the South Beach Diet. I sprinkle a little sand and suntan lotion on anything I shouldn't eat."

to place in spread out rural areas.

Many poor people and people of color are working at least full time, often at multiple jobs. When they get home, they don't necessarily have the time or energy to devote to cooking a big meal. If prepared, processed food is cheaper, more readily available, and faster, it isn't hard to see why one would choose that. Exercise too is time dependant; working 14-hour workdays don't leave a whole lot of time for going to the gym, or enjoying leisurely bike rides. Even those who have the time often don't have the energy. Anyone who has worked a job in the service industry (where a disproportionately large percentage of working class and people of color work) knows how exhausting it can be. Who wants to go for a run after spending 10 hours on your feet behind a cash register?

History Lesson
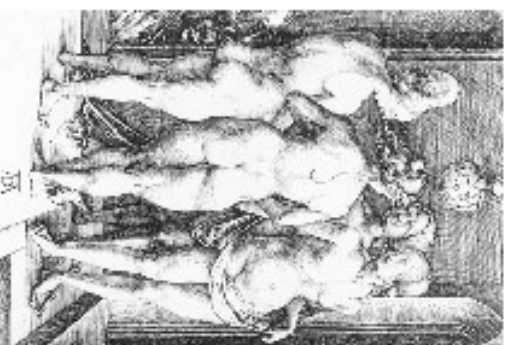
Fat didn't always mean unhealthy or ugly. In fact, being fat used to be a symbol of health; it meant that you were getting enough to eat, and that you weren't ill. What societies consider beautiful changes over time, and is often associated with characteristics possessed by the rich. Historically, only the richest people could afford to eat large quantities of food, and not spend all day working hard in the fields; during those periods being fat was considered attractive.

In our society today, only the rich can afford healthy foods and gym memberships, while many people can only afford unhealthy super-processed foods, spending their time working jobs that do not require much exercise.

Fatness is not the only beauty standard that has changed along with the times; take being tan for example. In western society, being tan used to be a quality that was looked down on. Only the rich could afford to spend their days inside, remaining pale, while most people had to work outside long hours, becoming tan. During that time period, paleness was considered attractive; people even wore makeup to make themselves appear paler. Now most of us have to spend

Race Class and Capitalism

Weight is affected by many things including how much we eat and exercise, as well as body type and genetics, but there's more to it. Most of those affected by this "epidemic" are by and large poor and/or people of color. This is an issue of race, class and capitalism. If we focus on the type and quantity of food we eat, and the amount we exercise, as reasons for obesity, then it makes perfect sense that people without money will be overweight.

What we call "healthy" food is expensive. Go into a grocery store near you and see what costs more: chips or salad greens? Also, many poor people and people of color live in what are known as "food deserts": inner cities where thousands of people may live in a few blocks, but where the only place to buy food is a corner store that may not even sell fruits, veggies or other non-processed foods. Many ways we think of to exercise are not available to people without money or who are living in either inner cities or rural areas. Gyms, for example, are often prohibitively expensive. Riding a bike is not practical on many busy city streets, or as a way to get from place

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our days inside working in offices, restaurants, and shopping malls. Only the rich can afford to spend time lazing outside, and being tan is considered attractive.

Living in America can skew our perspective; there are still plenty of places in the world where fatness is considered a sign of health and beauty. With globalization though, the American standards of health and beauty are being shipped around the world.

Our Fault?

Weight is seen as something determined by individuals. However, once you factor in that weight is partially determined by genetics, and that access to healthy food and exercise are often determined by broad social contexts that disproportionately effect poor people and people of color, the amount of control individuals hold over their own weight is often minor. But because it is believed that people control their own weight, and that outward physical characteristics are manifestations of inner personality traits and morals, discrimination against fat people is socially acceptable. In many places it is no longer acceptable to not hire a black person simply because they are black (and may be stereotyped as lazy), however it is seen as perfectly reasonable to not hire that same person because she is fat,

Acceptance

In response to all this fat fear and hatred a (mainly online) community has formed called the fat acceptance movement. This movement consists largely of blogs and other websites where "fat activists" write about their experiences, provide some support to people struggling in similar ways, and to discuss new items related to weight issues in one way or another. However, while the goals of these sites are noble, and they can certainly help some people find support, they often do little to address the reasons behind our society's fat phobia. Rather than blaming capitalist forces that cause most of us to be denied access to healthy food, and exercise opportunities, many of them focus on news stories about celebrities and fashion advice, with the moral being that you don't have to be thin to be happy, beautiful, or successful, but you still have to follow pop culture, and spend lots of time and energy (and money) on looking good. While these sites can be helpful, they are written mainly by middle aged, middle class, white women, and as such they can fail to address a lot of the community most affected by fat discrimination; poor people and people of color.

However, many radical communities are not much better; in our communities fatness is often associated with the greed, laziness, and excess of America and Capitalism. Even calling cops pigs has negative connotations about fat people. People in radical communities may see phrases like "riot, don't diet," but these slogans are rarely backed up

weight at all.

So what are people told to do about their "obesity problem"? Even if we ignorethe claims of miracle cures made by the diet industry (an industry that this year will make $315 billion) the basic suggestion for people considered "overweight" or "obese" is to eat less, and exercise more. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) explains this as a simple equation: calories in < calories out = loosing weight. The problem with this simplification is that people are not machines, and our bodies do not all act the same. This equation leaves out many important factors that help determine one's weight, like genetics, body shape, sex, age etc. Also problematic in this "solution" is the fact that while people are often capable of losing weight by eating dramatically less food, the weight is almost always gained back in full. This process is sometimes known as "yo-yo dieting," and it is far more dangerous for your body than simply maintaining a higher weight.

"I was on the low-carbohydrate diet for a week and lost three inches off my smile."

want to do. Racism too often gets dismissed as sensitivity or imagination. People are not necessarily overtly discriminated against or slurred at, but are followed in stores and taught to iron their hair.

The problem is that we have these definitions of things; we think we know what they look like. Eating disorders look like 90lb women who throw up after every meal, rape looks like forced intercourse from a stranger, and racism looks like vicious hate crimes and lynching. Not to say that those things don't happen, but seeing these cases as the definition forces us to ignore the things that happen to most of us everyday. Eating disorders are also 150lb girls who count the calories of everything they eat, rape is also the girl who wakes up in bed with a boyfriend who went ahead even though she said no, and racism is also the man who had 10 job interviews and didn't get one call back.

These are not problems to be solved with cops and courts and prisons, or with health care institutions; these things don't work. The calorie-counting girl goes to the doctor only to be told she should lose weight or she won't get insurance. The girl raped by her boyfriend reports him and gets told she shouldn't have drunk that glass of wine, or worn that skirt. The man without a job gets told he didn't try hard enough and that his unemployment check makes him a drain on society.

So these things go unreported, or whispered only to our friends in late night discussions where we bare our souls, make ourselves vulnerable, and try to make sure we aren't going crazy. Trying to reassure each

That doesn't mean I'm totally happy with the way I look, or that my mind has healed completely. I still find myself counting the calories I eat without meaning to, berating myself for eating "too much," and hating the way some clothes look on me. But I am so much better than I was. We need to change the way we think about fat people, and how we treat fat people (including ourselves). We need to think about the reasons why someone might look the way they do, without making any assumptions about that.

If you think you are too fat (or too skinny or too tall or too short or too blond, or too ashy...), try to love your body for what it does for you. Know that whatever you are going through, you are not alone. We need to take care of each other. Neither the corporate media, nor the "health" and "beauty" industries have our best interests in mind. We need to support the people in our communities, and love each other for who we are.

Note:

I use the word fat throughout this zine not as a slur or a derogatory term. I believe that fatness (like tallness, blondness etc.) should simply be a way of describing a physical trait; being fat is not a bad thing. I don't like to use the medicalized language of overweight/obese because that language assumes that there is something wrong with people; something that must be fixed.